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SUBJECT: VEERAPPAN'S DEATH PUTS DHARMAPURI'S FUTURE IN DOUBT

REF: 03 CHENNAI 1422

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A seventeen-year manhunt ended with the shooting death of K.M. Veerappan, the famed forest brigand of Dharmapuri. The shootout was the culmination of months of planning by the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN) and the police Special Task Force (STF). The operation showcased the organizational capacity of the state police, but leaves questions about security in the region. With Veerappan gone, the GoTN must integrate Dharmapuri into the rest of state or security concerns may persist. END SUMMARY.

POLICE GUN DOWN BRIGAND AFTER 17-YEAR MANHUNT

2. (SBU) After 17 years of futilely searching for the famed forest brigand, Veerappan, the Tamil Nadu police finally brought his banditry to an end. Having infiltrated the Veerappan's gang, STF agents convinced the aging bandit to seek medical attention for an eye condition. On October 18, the agents lured Veerappan into an ambulance, which took the brigand and three members of his gang to a prearranged location near Pappalapatti, where 60 additional agents waited in hiding. According to news reports, the STF agents used a loudspeaker to ask Veerappan to surrender. He did not initially respond, and after repeated entreaties allegedly opened fire on the police. The STF agents responded with heavy gunfire that killed the brigand and three accomplices. The agent posing as the ambulance driver escaped unharmed.

3. (SBU) The shootout brought an end to Veerappan's three-decade reign of crime in the dense Sathyamangalam forests of the Dharmapuri district of northern Tamil Nadu. Known for his uncanny knowledge of these forest areas, the brigand got his start as a teenager paching elephants. He later expanded into smuggling sandalwood, a material that fetches a high price in India due to its role in religious ceremonies. In an effort to stave off capture, Veerappan allegedly killed at least 120 people, of whom many were forest and government officials. He caught the nation's attention in 2000 when he captured Kannada film star Rajkumar and held him for 109 days, before releasing him under mysterious circumstances.

VEERAPPAN'S END A MAJOR VICTORY FOR CM AND TOP POLICEMAN

4. (U) For Tamil Nadu's chief minister, J. Jayalalithaa, bringing Veerappan's reign to a close was a significant political victory. She rose to power in 2001 partly on the strength of her campaign promise to hunt down the brigand more effectively than the opposition party had. After three years of frustration, she took the opportunity to gloat over fulfilling her promise. At a public meeting organized by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the ASEAN Secretariat on October 20, she exulted in her success,

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calling Veerappan's death "a dream come true." She also lavished praise on the STF, granting a house site and \$6,000 to 770 former and current agents. In addition, she gave them one-step promotions in rank at a widely publicized public event.

5. (SBU) The mission's success also vindicated STF Additional Director of Police, Vijay Kumar. A no-nonsense approach that created trouble for him earlier in his career drew considerable praise from the media and politicians in the Veerappan incident. Before receiving his current assignment, Vijay Kumar served as the Chennai City Police Commissioner from 2001 to 2003. During this time, his "shoot first, ask questions later" approach cleaned up the city, but landed him in trouble, particularly when he shot Pannayar Venkatesan, a criminal with ties to the powerful Nadar community. Vijay Kumar's failure to arrest five journalists from The Hindu

(Reftel) led the Chief Minister to transfer him to the much less desirable STF posting.

OPERATION REQUIRED MONTHS OF COORDINATION AND PLANNING

16. (U) The success of "Operation Cocoon" also highlighted the intelligence and planning capabilities of the Tamil Nadu police. Long considered among the most professional and most capable forces in India, the STF operation showed that the state police are now capable of sustained surveillance, intelligence, and infiltration campaigns. The shootout was the culmination of ten months of planning in coordination with several branches of the Tamil Nadu state government. To counter the brigand's extensive intelligence network in nearby villages, the STF obtained licenses for agents to operate vans and taxis, in addition to installing agents in small shops and tea stands. The intelligence gathered by these agents was crucial to coordinating the confrontation that led to Veerappan's death.

FIRST INSTANCE OF INTERSTATE POLICE COOPERATION

17. (SBU) In addition to demonstrating the organizational capacities of the Tamil Nadu state police, "Operation Cocoon" marked the first instance of prolonged and formal interstate police cooperation between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The location of the Sathyamangalam forests on the border between the two states had long allowed Veerappan to evade local police by crossing the border. Regular meetings between the regional police chiefs from each state, interoperable communication sets, and operations by local police forces in their neighboring state tightened the net around the brigand, significantly limiting his movement. According to Pitchandi, Secretary Public in the Government of Tamil Nadu, neither state had ever cooperated on such a significant law enforcement operation. Venkatakrishnan, Director General - Intelligence for Tamil Nadu agreed, noting, "There was a degree of interaction at the local level between the two states that did not exist in the past."

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS QUESTION AGGRESSIVE POLICE TACTICS

18. (SBU) While government and law enforcement officials celebrated Veerappan's death, human rights activists publicly questioned the STF's actions. Noting that STF agents had sustained serious injuries in past encounters with Veerappan, human rights lawyers wondered how none were hurt in an allegedly intense shootout. They also questioned the procedures followed in the postmortem examination. The doctor conducted the exam with several police officers standing over him and hundreds more demanding access to the building. Coupled with the initial plan by police to cremate the body (finally, he was buried) and refusal to allow examination of the ambulance, many activists doubted the claim that the police killed Veerappan in an "encounter." Many implied instead that he had been simply ambushed with no opportunity to surrender.

VEERAPPAN'S DEATH - A POWER VACUUM IN DHARMAPURI?

19. (SBU) So complete was Veerappan's hold on the Sathyamangalam forests that his death leaves the future of the region in doubt. Acknowledged to be one of the least developed districts in Tamil Nadu, Dharmapuri has been effectively unserved by the state government for many years. Its poverty and remoteness make it an ideal breeding ground for discontent. According to Pitchandi, "The terrain is ideally suited for a Veerappan Junior." Veerappan reportedly had links to Tamil nationalist groups like the Tamil Nadu Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Tamil Nadu Retrieval Troops (TNRT), but K.P. Sunil, Vice President - News at Jaya TV, discounted any shared ideology. He said that these groups have long been active in the area, due to their subtle links to the majority caste in the area, the Vanniars. Veerappan was simply using these groups for weapons and support, and was not interested in furthering their cause. Post sources believed increased support for Tamil nationalist groups would be unlikely, as the mainstream Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) draw considerable support from Vanniar youth groups, leaving little room for the TNLA and TNRT. According to K. Chandru, a lawyer and human rights activist, "Even if the Government of Tamil Nadu does nothing, the PMK and DMK will keep [the TNLA and TNRT] at

bay."

10. (SBU) Despite the brigand's link to the predominant caste in Dharmapuri, local political parties are not attempting to turn Veerappan into a hero. According to Dr. Jeyaranjan, Director of the Institute of Development Alternatives, "There is no attempt to iconize (sic) Veerappan." Both the PMK and the DMK have refrained from condemning his killing, passing up the chance to turn his death into a political rallying point. According to A.K. Moorthy, PMK Member of Parliament, Veerappan belonged to a very small subcaste within the Vanniar community, further dampening the political response to his death.

11. (SBU) In addition to Tamil ultra groups, the People's War has also been active in Dharmapuri. While this Maoist group has found success and support in Andhra Pradesh, the high urbanization of Tamil Nadu has limited the group's opportunities. Dharmapuri's lack of infrastructure has allowed the People's War to gain a small foothold in the region. However, according to Jeyaranjan, the People's War is not indigenous to Dharmapuri and does not have Veerappan's knowledge of the forests, limiting their activities to the plains. Jeyaranjan speculated that the STF would remain in Dharmapuri for at least a year, making expansion difficult for the People's War.

GOTN RECOGNIZES NEED FOR DEVELOPMENT, BUT PLANS VAGUE

12. (U) With Veerappan no longer terrorizing government and police officials in Dharmapuri, the way is clear for the GoTN to integrate Tamil Nadu's "Wild West" into the rest of the state. According to Professor K. Nagaraj of the Madras Institute for Development Studies, "The state government has invested heavily in the area," promoting mango cultivation and floriculture. However, the forests remain isolated and cut off from the rest of the state's infrastructure. The Chief Minister has talked of an integrated development plan, but her Home Secretary, Sheela Rani Chunkath, was not able to elaborate on the details of the plan. "No money has been allocated yet," she said.

GOTN'S TASK: DEVELOP REGION OR FACE NEW SECURITY THREATS

13. (SBU) Comment: While Veerappan's death removed the main security threat in Dharmapuri, the conditions that spawned his power remain. Its poverty, isolation, and lack of infrastructure leave the area ripe for further security threats. The current contenders for power lack either knowledge of the local terrain or local political support, giving the GoTN time to bring this comparatively lawless region back into its reach. However, if the Chief Minister fails to deliver the development she promises, the region could remain the "Wild West" of Tamil Nadu and pose future security concerns for the state. END COMMENT.

HAYNES